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## WHAT IS IT TO LIVE AND THINK LIKE GILLES CHÂTELET?

PHILOFICTION ALTERITY, BADIOU, DETERMINATION, EXTERIORITY, LIVE LIKE A PIG, NEOLIBERALISM, VIRTUALITY

### – What is To Live and Think Like Pigs about?

*[Châtelet:] It's a book about the fabrication of individuals who operate a soft censorship on themselves... In them, humanity is reduced to a bubble of rights, not going beyond strict biological functions of the yum-yum-fart type. . .as well as the vroom-vroom and beep-beep of cybernetics and the suburbs. . .So people with entirely adequate IQs don't become free individuals. . .instead they constitute what I call cyber-livestock [...] All fresh meat, all fresh brains, must become quantifiable and marketable.*

In the opening pages of his foreword to Gilles Châtelet's *To Live and Think Like Pigs*, Alain Badiou repeatedly emphasizes the need for preparation on the part of the reader. In spite of Châtelet's critical violence, poignant sarcasm, and general disenchantment with the present state of affairs, we readers must prepare ourselves for the encounter with that "rage to live," which "animated Gilles Châtelet" ("What is it to Live?" 5). A rage whose urgency makes itself felt already in the book's Preface. However, remarks Badiou, this was always a rage bound to and tempered by a melancholy felt in the face of the fact that more and more each day "we are solicited (and increasingly so) to live – and to think – 'like pigs'" (5). What is more, adds Badiou, what is additionally exceptional and worthy of note is the fact that despite Châtelet being someone better known for his expertise in the history and theory of the sciences and the philosophy of mathematics, the fundamental commitment and impetus that guides his thought is better understood as one in which "every proposition on science [i.e. principle of Thought] can be converted into a maxim for life [i.e. principle of action]." Thus, if Châtelet is to be remembered, it will be as an individual whose life and thought will forever remain irreducible to the concerns of a pure epistemologist or professional academic. And for Badiou, Châtelet's is a thought whose chief concern was always the question *what does it mean to live?* Now, to demonstrate why this is so, Badiou proposes the following five principles that are to serve as an introduction to, and outline of, the architectonic of Châtelet's life and work as a whole: the principle of **exteriority**, the principle of **interiority**, the principle of **determination**, the principle of the **indeterminacy** of Being, and the principle of **invention**.

**Principle of Exteriority:** *Thought is the unfolding of the space that does justice to your body*

According to Badiou, if we were to identify the single theme that unifies Châtelet's range of interests, which span from the arts and sciences to questions of revolution, it would be the idea that "thought is rooted in the body;" where body is "conceived of as dynamic spatiality" (5). What does it mean to say that thought is rooted in dynamic spatiality; that the grounds for thought is the body? It means that Thought finds its "origin" (this is Badiou's formulation) in geometry whereby "all thought is the knotting together of a space and a gesture, the gestural unfolding of a space" (5). In other words, if Thought is rooted in the body or that what grounds Thought is a certain spatial dynamism, then 'to think' necessarily means to engender a particular act (gesture) within a particular organization of space (geometric plane) – Thought, says Châtelet, was never solely the domain of the mind and necessarily involves the conjugation of the points of one's body with those of a plane. And it is this image of Thought as the conjugation of a body with a plane that leads Badiou to claim that Châtelet's first maxim was as follows: 'Unfold the space that does justice to your body' (5). And it is this maxim of finding the space that does justice to one's body that is the practical correlate to Châtelet's own image of Thought as being founded upon a body (i.e. spatial dynamism): insofar as we are thinking and thus rooted in a body, we are simultaneously compelled to act in such a way that the conjugation of body and plane does justice to the body of Thought (the body which is the ground for Thought): "Châtelet's love of partying obeyed this maxim. It is more ascetic than it might appear, for the construction of the nocturnal space of pleasure is at least as much of a duty as a passive assent. To be a pig is to understand nothing of this duty; it is to wallow in satisfaction without understanding what it really involves" (6).

#### **Principle of Interiority: Solitude is the 'Intimate Essence' of Alterity**

If Thought is rooted in the body and establishes the obligation of determining the space which does justice to one's body, what we discover is that for every process of realisation there exists some, "virtuality of articulation that is its principle of deployment. Geometry is not a science of extrinsic extension...it is a resource for extraction and for thickening, a set of deformational gestures, a properly physical virtuality. So that we must think a sort of interiority of space, an intrinsic virtue of variation, which the thinking gesture at once instigate and accompanies"(6). In other words, the fact of Thought being grounded upon the body (as spatial dynamism) has as its necessary consequence the fact that the very function of any given process of realization (or actualization) can only be grasped by understanding its *raison d'être*; by grasping why and how a given phenomena was able to be realized in the first place. That is to say, *realization* or *actualization* is a process that is not determined by that which it produces (i.e. the latent potential of any social phenomena can in no way serve as reason or cause for that which has been actualized). That said... how does Châtelet view this maxim of Thought as a maxim that also holds for the question of 'what does it mean to live?'

According to Badiou, the fact that processes of actualization are determined by their virtual components are, for Châtelet, indicative of the fact that the process of extensive unfolding of ('just') space proceeds via gesture is repeated but this time with respect to what is intensive and belongs to interiority. For, as Badiou remarks, Thought is comprised of "a set of deformational gestures, a properly physical virtuality" (6), i.e. the deformation of a space that remains unjust vis-a-vis our body, and whose movements are guided not by the requirements of realisation but by what is virtually possible and/or impossible. It is in this way that Châtelet's first principle (Thought is rooted in the body) gives rise to its second: just as the 'deformational gesture' is the developmental or extensive function of Thought (the pure function which is to be realised), so too is it the case that **solitude** as the 'interiority of space' and which harbors that 'intrinsic virtue of variation,' is Thought's enveloping or intensive function. Thus Badiou can write that, "[I]n terms of life, this time is a matter of remarking that solitude and interiority are, alas, the intimate essence of alterity...Gilles Châtelet knew innumerable people, but in this apparent dissemination there was a considerable, and perhaps ultimately mortal, dose of solitude and withdrawal. It is from this point of bleak solitude, also, that he was able to judge the abject destiny of our supposedly 'convivial' societies" (6). And it is in this way, then, that in affirming the maxim of unfolding the space that does justice to our body; a space that also serves as the very ground for Thought as such; we discover that the development of 'just' space is only made possible by preserving the interiority of space for solitude and withdrawal. While embodiment may define the Being of Thought, it remains the case that it is through the solitude of interiority that Thought-as-gesture-of-deformation possesses any degree of determinacy. And in the absence of any interiority; lacking solitude as that "intimate essence of alterity and of the external world;" Thought becomes capable of nothing more than its passive assent to the nocturnal space of pleasure:

At this decades' end, a veritable miracle of the Night takes place, enabling Money, Fashion, the Street, the Media, and even the University to get high together and pool their talents to bring about this paradox: a festive equilibrium, the cordial boudoir of the 'tertiary service society' which would very quickly become the society of boredom, of the spirit of imitation, of cowardice, and above all of the petty game of reciprocal envy – 'first one to wake envies the others'. It's one of those open secrets of Parisian life: every trendy frog, even a cloddish specimen, knows very well that when Tout-Paris swings, 'civil society' will soon start to groove. In particular, any sociologist with a little insight would have been able to observe with interest the slow putrefaction of liberatory optimism into libertarian cynicism, which would soon become right-hand man to the liberal Counter-Reformation that would follow; and the drift from 'yeah man, y'know, like...', a little adolescent-hippy but still likeable, into the 'let's not kid ourselves' of the Sciences-Po freshman. (Châtelet, *To Live and Think Like Pigs*, 8-9)

#### **Principle of Determination: 'Be the prince of your own unsuspected beauty'**

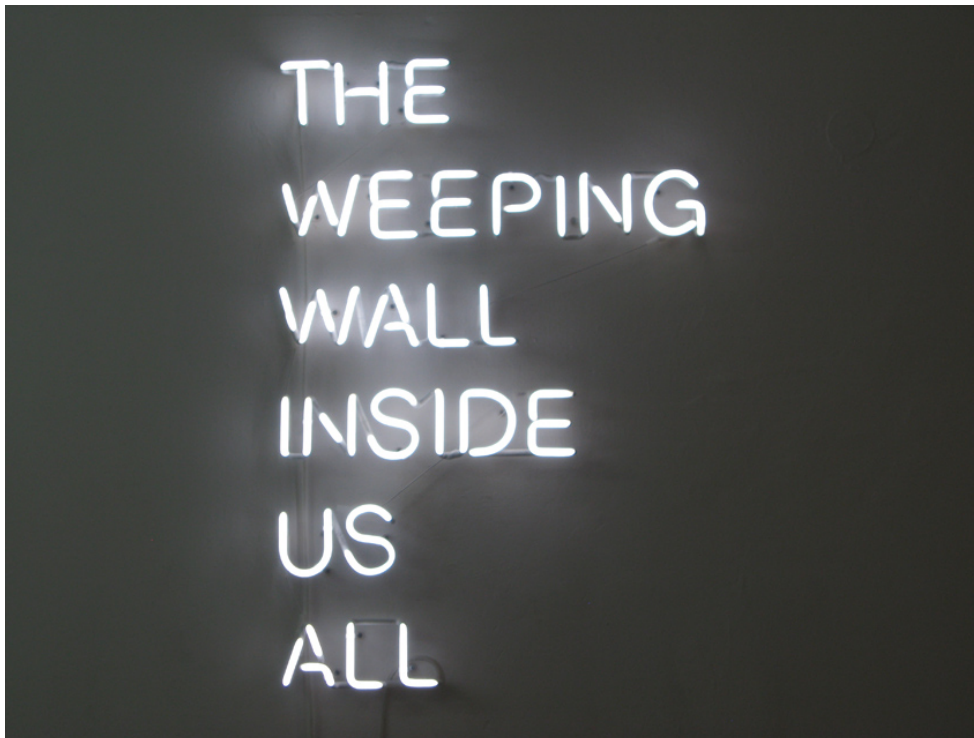
Now, if it is the case that virtual solitude alone is capable of rendering Thought's deformational gestures (gestures which unfold a 'just' space vis-a-vis the body as foundation for Thought as such), then the question necessarily arises: What is the criteria or measure by which Thought attains a discrete and determinate existence? If the virtual is what guides the process of actualisation, to what end does virtuality as such aspire? According to Badiou, the virtual determination of actualisation, appears in Châtelet's text as a form of determination that is oriented toward the 'latent' and/or 'temporal' continuum. As Badiou writes, "[T]he latent continuum is always more important than the discontinuous cut [...] For Châtelet, the history of thought is never ready-made, preperiodised, already carved up. Thought is sleeping in the temporal continuum. There are only singularities awaiting reactivation, creative virtualities lodged in these folds of time, which the body can discover and accept (6). Now, just as the body is the ground for Thought, the latent continuum as that set of not-yet realised virtual-potentials provide the outline of that which the process of actualisation is to realise. To unfold the space that does justice to one's body; to deform *actual* or *realised* space (i.e. to no longer passively assent to the present order of space); such that thought and gesture are explicated in accordance with everything that has not yet been given its actual and concrete form. Thus, Badiou concludes,

The maxim of life this time is: 'Reactivate your dormant childhood, be the prince of your own unsuspected beauty. Activate your virtuality.' In the order of existence, materialism might be called the desiccation of the virtual, and so Gilles sought to replace this materialism with the romantic idealism of the powers of childhood. To live and think like a pig is also to kill childhood within oneself, to imagine stupidly that one is a 'responsible' well-balanced adult: a nobody, in short. (Badiou, 'What is it to Live?' 6)

It is this latent continuity of the virtual that give form to Thought's deforming gestures and render it as an act whose very significance is indexed to the not-yet realised potential of interiority. For if Thought is said to be disfiguring in its deeds it is precisely because what is realised are modes of being who remain in an asymmetrical relation to the currently existing order of things. Perhaps we could say that one of the inaugural gestures of Thinking is its disagreement with the structure, and thus reality, of the world which it confronts. Absent this disagreement, Thought confronts, once more, that passive assent which signals its imminent failure.

**Principle of Indeterminate Being: 'Love only that which overturns your order'**

Now, while it is the case that Thought resides in the latent continuum of virtuality and orients its actualisation in accordance with 'the prince of its own unsuspected beauty,' it is also the case that Thought grasps Being *only* in moments of its *indeterminacy*. For Badiou, Being as indeterminate commits Châtelet to a certain "dialectical ambiguity" wherein "Being reveals itself to thought – whether scientific or philosophical, no matter – in 'centres of indifference' that bear within them the ambiguity of all possible separation" (6). For, as Châtelet writes, it is these "points of maximal ambiguity where a new pact between understanding and intuition is sealed" (7). However, one might ask, what does indifferent Being have to do with the virtual's determination of actualisation? What is the relation between indeterminate Being and the determinations of Thought? For Châtelet, it is this confrontation of indeterminate Being and the determination of the virtual of Thought that acts as that propitious moment whereby the virtual acts upon the process of actualisation; for it is precisely in the absence of the self-evidence of determinate and definite space, which served as that which Thought passively believes to be "capable of orienting itself and fixing its path," (7) that the virtual and the actual are drawn together to the point of their indistinction. Thus it is when Being is indeterminate (or ambiguous) that Thought increases its capacity of deforming space in the name of its body. Hence, says Badiou, this principle of indeterminate Being is given the following, practical, formulation: "Be the dandy of ambiguities. On pain of losing yourself, love only that which overturns your order.' As for the pig, he wants to put everything definitively in its place, to reduce it to possible profit; he wants everything to be labelled and consumable" (7).



**Principle of Invention: *To live is to invent unknown dimensions of existing***

Thus far we have seen how in beginning with the maxim of Thought as the unfolding of a space that does justice to the body as ground of Thinking, Châtelet goes on to develop the principle of interiority/solitude, which leads to the discovery that the virtual determines actualisation, and thereby obliging us to “love what overturns our order” insofar as Thought’s passive assent to a certain pre-established harmony of space is that which Thought must deform through its gestures. However, the question necessarily arises: is the logical outcome of Thought’s deformation of a predetermined space merely amount to the celebration of disorder pure and simple? As it approaches the limits of what it is capable of when confronted with indifferent/ambiguous Being, can Thought be something other than the discordant harmony of deformed space and the idealized continuum of time? To these questions, Châtelet’s response is strictly Bergsonian. Following Bergson’s insight that it would be false to treat disorder as the opposite of order (since ‘disorder’ is the term used for the discovery of an order we were not anticipating), Châtelet argues that not only is Thought something more than the multiplication of deformed space and ideal time; it is precisely when the preceding conditions, or maxims, of Thought have been satisfied that “the higher organisation of thought is...attained” (8). What is this higher order of Thought? Badiou’s answer to this question, as lengthy as it is moving, deserves to be quoted at length:

As we can see: a thought is that which masters, in the resolute gestural treatment of the most resistant lateralities, the engendering of the ‘continuously diverse.’ The grasping of being does not call for an averaging-out...it convokes... the irreducibility, the dialectical irreducibility, of dimensions. In this sense thought is never unilaterally destined to signifying organization...But this is not where the ultimate states of thought lie. They lie in a capacity to seize the dimension; and for this one must invent notations, which exceed the power of the letter. On this point, romantic idealism teaches us to seek not the meaning of our existence, but the exactitude of its dimensions. To live is to invent unknown dimensions of existing and thus, as Rimbaud said, to ‘define vertigo’. This, after all, is what we ought to retain from the life and the death of Gilles Châtelet: we need vertigo, but we also need form – that is to say, its definition. For vertigo is indeed what the romantic dialectic seeks to find at the centre of rationalist itself, insofar as rationality is invention, and therefore a fragment of natural force [...] It is a matter of discerning, or retrieving, through polemical violence, in the contemporary commercial space, the resources of a temporalization; of knowing whether some gesture of the thought-body is still possible. In order not to live and think like pigs, let us be of the school of he for whom...only one questioned mattered in the end—an imperative question, a disquieting question: The question of the watchman who hears in space the rustling of a gesture, and calls our: ‘*Who’s living?*’ Gilles asked, and asked himself, the question: ‘*Who’s living?*’ We shall strive, so as to remain faithful to him, to choose. (Badiou, ‘What is it to Live?’ 7-8)

For Badiou, then, Châtelet never faltered in his commitment to Thought as deformational gestures which allow Thought to grasp diversity as such; to grasp the multiple as “the production of a deformation of the linear [the order enforced by the pig who wants to put everything in its place; the space of consumption and circulation] through laterality [the time of inventing new dimensions of existence determined by the latent continuum of the virtual]” (7). That is to say, in every deformed and mutilated act Thought is able to prise open the rigid organization of commercial space and re-establish its relation to those virtual images over-

determining the realization of actual object. Thus, Châtelet conceives of the relationship between Thought's deformational cut, which brings a new order and connection to those spaces of commerce and consumption. And much the same way as Deleuze understood the relationship of the actual to the virtual, so too does Châtelet maintain that the virtual image is contemporary with the actual object and serves as its double, "its 'mirror image,' as in *The Lady from Shanghai*, in which the mirror takes control of a character, engulfs him and leaves him as just a virtuality" (*Dialogues II*, 150). Hence Badiou can write that at the height of its powers, Thought undergoes a transformation and comes to establish a new "pact between understanding and intuition" such that "separative understanding and intuition fuse, in a paradoxical intensity of thought" (6-7). For it is this moment of Thought's intensive functioning wherein what is given in our experience of the virtual finds itself without a corresponding actual phenomenal object. And in instances such as these, Thought is obliged to invent or discover the forms by which the temporalization of what is virtual within laterality achieves an intentional and determinate deformation of the axis of linearity. Only then does Thinking reach the highest degree of its power, which is its ability to expose the form or exact dimensions of existence, which will serve as the criteria for the reorganization of space (discrete, discontinuous).

Not to live and think like pigs, then. To remain faithful to everything that is at stake in the question of '*What is it to live?*' and to always inquire into who among us are in fact *living*. As we have seen, any possible answer to these questions begin with a gesture that desecrates what is sacrosanct in cybernetic-capitalist terrestrial life. And perhaps from the present vantage point we are not too distant from the position Châtelet found himself; thinking and posing these questions – '*what is it to live? and who among us are living?*' – in the shadow of neo-liberalism's Counter-Reformation; that era, says Châtelet, which came to be defined by "the market's Invisible Hand, which dons no kid gloves in order to starve and crush silently, and which is invincible because it applies its pressure everywhere and nowhere; but which nonetheless...has need of a voice. And the voice was right there waiting. The neo-liberal Counter-Reformation...would furnish the classic services of reactionary opinion, delivering a social alchemy to forge a political force out of everything that a middle class invariably ends up exuding-fear, envy, and conformity" (*TLTLP*, 18-19). And if we were to pose Châtelet's question for our historical present, one would find an answer from Châtelet himself; an answer that is, however, a negative response:

"...here lies the whole imposture of the city-slicker narcissism...the claim to reestablish all the splendour of that nascent urbanism that, in the Middle Ages and throughout the Renaissance, brings together talents, intensifying them in a new spacetime – whereas in fact all our new urbanists do is turn a profit from a placement, a double movement that pulverizes and compactifies spacetime so as to subordinate it to a socio-communicational space governed by the parking lot and the cellphone. From now on the spacetime of the city will be a matter of the econometric management of the stock of skills per cubic metre per second, and of the organization of the number of encounters of functional individuals, encounters that naturally will be promoted to the postmodern dignity of 'events' [...] In any case, for the great majority of Turbo-Becassines and Cyber-Gideons, cosmopolitanism is above all a certain transcontinental way of staying at home and amongst their own by teleporting the predatory elegance that immediately distinguishes the urban monster as a bearer of hope...from the Gribouilles and the Petroleuses, afflicted with vegetative patience or saurian militancy."

(Châtelet, *To Live and Think Like Pigs*, 67-68)



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